

One

THE TEMPERATURE IN THE WHITE MOUNTAINS HAD DROPPED TO negative five degrees with a wind-chill factor of minus forty. The ten-passenger twin-engine aircraft floated across the vast gray sky, slowly gaining altitude. In spite of strong warnings from Air Traffic Control, the Merlin IV had taken off and had been in the air for nearly fifteen minutes.

Although all VFR-rated pilots at the Errol airport had been grounded, the pilot of the plane, Bud Graves, was Instrument-rated, therefore free to fly through the storm if he elected. The flight was filled to capacity with six of his colleagues, both male and female attorneys at Benson, Graves & Sneed, and two couples that had unofficially chartered their seats. They had already boarded and were ready to go when he had received the Center Weather Advisory. A storm was moving into the White Mountain region at an alarming rate, yet Graves had an important case in court the next day and couldn't take a chance the system would snow him in. The advisory had warned of adverse conditions with turbulence, low level wind shear and clear ice in the clouds, but Graves was not to be daunted. He had picked his way through many a storm without incident and wasn't about to let even the northern wilds of New Hampshire keep him down. By his calculations, he would be landing in Boston a mere two-hundred and ten miles away, just in time for supper.

"My radar's working fine," he had responded to the report. "I'll find a hole in the pattern just like I always do." Yet in touting his competence to Air Traffic Control, there was one factor he failed to mention: he hadn't waited the mandatory eight-hour turnaround required by the FAA between the time a pilot consumes alcohol and the time his feet leave the ground.

. . .

KYLIE O'ROURKE had just drifted asleep when the turbulence first hit. The plane dropped suddenly, then immediately rose again. Her husband, Jack, instinctively grabbed her hand.

"What was that?" he asked, looking about. The group of attorneys at the front of the plane were passing around a bottle of Scotch, unfazed by the jolt.

"It's alright Jack," Kylie said and kissed his cheek. "It's just a little bad weather." Just then the floor seemed to fall from beneath them then forcefully rush back up. It repeated the motion several more times drawing screeches from the passengers. Their drinks were spilled and their bags tossed about, until finally, the plane leveled out again. Sunlight broke through the windows and a cheer came from the group of drunken attorneys.

Kylie peered out the window at the storm cloud that had released them. She looked over at Jack whose lips had gone white. Tiny beads of sweat had formed at his temples. "Are you okay?" she asked.

He gave her a half-smile and adjusted his body in the seat. She could see that he was terrified and felt guilty for dragging him onto the flight. His father had died in a plane crash when Jack was fifteen. That had been twenty years ago but the fear of flying had stayed with him, making him apprehensive from the moment the trip had been proposed.

"Fly? Why do we have to fly? New Hampshire's the next state over. It's silly to take a plane," he had argued. His point had been reasonable enough: the Dixville Notch area was a mere four hours from Boston in good weather. Yet the chartered seats on the aircraft had been part of a gift from an appreciative client—a ski-package to the famed Balsam's Resort. Located within the northern region of New Hampshire near the Canadian border, the four-star destination was not exactly Kylie and Jack's style, but they knew it would be a much needed break. After ten years of hard work building their own interior design firm, it was time to enjoy the perks. "But we can't just take part of the gift," Kylie had argued, fearful of offending their client. "Besides, the weather up there is so unpredictable. It could take forever if the roads are bad."

With thought of having to trudge through the back country on a snow-packed highway, Jack had finally conceded and until that moment, the trip had been a success.

Kylie's best friend, Amelia Blackwell and her husband Dix, had flown up from Savannah to join them, both couples taking the last leg of the journey together. After six days of non-stop skiing and warm pampered nights inside the luxurious hotel, the two couples had caught the flight bound to Boston where Kylie and Jack would remain, while Amelia and Dix continued back to Savannah. Kylie would report back to her client, Alex Newhunger, that the trip had been a pleasure and tell him that the next time he needed one of his mansions refurbished, she and Jack would be there for him again.

With another jolt of the plane, Kylie squeezed her husband's hand. "We'll be on the ground soon," she promised.

He threw her a glance. "That's what I'm afraid of," he grumbled.

"Now, now," she whispered, kissing him tenderly on the cheek. As much as she hated to see him uneasy, she couldn't help but admire the way it made him look. He was a handsome if not beautiful man with long lean angles to his delicate face and lanky body—attributes he had acquired from his mother, much to his father's dismay. His father, who had been a stocky, beer-drinking, cigar-smoking man, believed it necessary to instill in his winsome young son a strong sense of manhood to counterbalance his almost feminine comeliness. Jack's high cheek bones, small up-turned nose and soft skin had long since been roughed and scarred by years of football, basketball and every other type of activity that proved he was more than a pretty boy. His body was strong and muscular, and his hands worn from sixteen years of work as a carpenter . . . certainly a respectable occupation for the son of a brawny factory worker from South Boston. After years of tough discipline his father had succeeded in his quest and had turned out an insecure son that would never be accepting of his beauty or of anything else that he encountered; but Jack was masculine if nothing else.

From the moment Kylie had met him, she had been intrigued by the vibrant intensity with which he approached life, as though by sheer concentration he could change anything around him or within himself; even obliterate all traces of vulnerability or grace. It was the glimpses into the man that should have been that kept Kylie riveted. As he sat beside her clutching her hand, his face lost its virile stranglehold and took on the frightened innocence of a child. His curly blonde hair, blue eyes and pouting lips gave him the guileless look of a

cherub; but a cherub Jack was not. It was an interesting juxtaposition that brought a smile to Kylie's face.

"What are you smiling at?" he asked, the tiny line between his eyes returning.

"Nothing, Jack," Kylie said, unable to remove the grin from her face. "I was just thinking about how cute you are," she said.

"Give me a break," Jack grumbled, slouching back in his seat.

Dix Hamilton peered around from the seat ahead of them, his short black hair standing on end. "Looking a little pale there, Jack," he said with a mischievous smile.

"You're one to talk, you bloodless albino," Jack retorted to Dix's delight. "Just turn your cheerful, earring-ed butt around, 'cause I don't want to look at it."

Dix laughed and disappeared again.

"You're lucky he's got a sense of humor," Kylie said.

"He just likes to torment me," Jack said.

"That's because it's so easy," she said, unable to suppress another smile.

"There you go again," said Jack with genuine irritation. "You're enjoying this aren't you? . . . Getting me on this damn plane. These guys are idiots, I'm telling you," he scowled, glowering at the loud attorneys.

"Jack, just relax," said Kylie, suddenly growing irritated herself.

Amelia's head slowly appeared over the seat. She glanced at Jack who sat pouting, then turned to Kylie with a heavy smile.

"Don't worry," said Kylie, motioning toward Jack. "If he doesn't behave we'll stick him out on the wing."

"Kylie," reprimanded Amelia. "Leave him alone."

The two smiled at one another. They had wanted to sit together but Jack was insistent on having Kylie next to him. It was painful for the two women, who lived 703 miles apart, to be so close yet unable to talk. From the time they were seven years old, when they had met on the playground of St. Mary's School for Girls in the Historic District of Savannah, the friends had been inseparable. Even after Kylie had moved from Savannah back to her hometown of Boston at the age of twenty-two, the distance hadn't kept them apart. In the following twelve years they had talked daily and visited often. While most friendships would have dwindled, theirs had only deepened.

“Hey, you’re bleeding,” Amelia said.

Kylie suddenly became aware of the sweet taste of blood in her mouth. She touched her lip and felt a small cut.

“It must have happened during the turbulence,” she said reaching for her bag.

“Here,” Amelia said, offering a tissue.

“Thanks.”

Amelia smiled and disappeared once again onto the other side of the seat. Kylie pulled out a compact and dabbed the blood from her lip. Adjusting her long auburn hair, she frowned to see that her eyes were still swollen from the night before. She and Jack had argued until nearly daylight. The long night’s tears and lack of sleep had created a puffed look, that, in spite of her concern, went unnoticed by anyone other than Amelia. Most strangers would be too taken with Kylie’s clover-green eyes and long dark lashes to notice any temporary flaw. In fact, most found it hard to look into her strong gaze for long without looking away. Her lion-like mane of hair, full lips, tawny freckled skin and self-possessed confidence made them cower under her attention. Her casual attitude toward her appearance only seemed to add to her disheveled beauty. With the exception of ruby lipstick, she rarely wore make-up. It was simply too time-consuming. She was indifferent to her looks, except of course, when they revealed more than she cared to tell. Her eyes had betrayed her that morning. When she had descended the long stairs of the hotel, Amelia knew instantly it had been one of many rough nights and Kylie felt embarrassed. They usually experienced each other’s problems from afar, with seven hundred miles of phone line to ease the reality of marriage or lack thereof. It always made for an awkward adjustment every time they saw each other and realized that the voice had a body and face that time was slowly changing.

Kylie sighed as she closed the compact and returned the bag to the floor. Within eight hours, her closest friend and strongest source of stability, would be hundreds of miles away from her in Savannah. She had implored Amelia to stay in Boston for awhile, but her beloved friend had to get back for work. Saying good-bye was always the hardest part, and it left her feeling sad. Though the friends came from totally different backgrounds, they had formed a life-long bond that gave them both a profound feeling of security. Upon their first

meeting, they had connected instantly, finding in each other what their own self was lacking.

Kylie had been born into a poor, volatile household, where every day brought about a new adventure of one countenance or another. She was Boston-Irish: curvy, strong-willed and with a temper to match. In spite of her buoyancy and a firm sense of survival, grim happenings always seemed to seep into her roller coaster life. There was no middle ground of experiences in Kylie's life, only extreme highs and extreme lows. While some would consider her to be the luckiest person on earth, others would consider her ill-fated.

Amelia, on the other hand, had been raised by wealthy, cultured parents steeped in the strong traditions of a Southern wealth. It was a quiet household governed by the stifling forces of unbroken formalities. She was blonde, thin and delicately sublime, her tenor equally clandestine and tender. She had been sheltered and protected, and within the overly maternal walls a timorous spirit had formed.

The most stable influence Kylie would ever know was Amelia. She learned from Amelia the importance of boundaries and that her erratic energy could be focused so that the demons within would not destroy her. Whenever she ventured too far, Amelia was always there to pull her back. When she lacked the refinement of one born into the socially elite, Amelia smoothed her rough edges and taught her poise.

Kylie, in turn, showed Amelia how to risk in order to live. When Amelia lacked the confidence of a rebel, Kylie led the way. As an adult, Kylie helped to bring the single most important love into Amelia's life: Dix Hamilton. She had given Amelia the strength to marry the penniless, young musician against her mother's wishes.

It was a perfect friendship in every way; so perfect that Kylie felt the same understanding and accord lacking within her own troubled marriage; but she loved Jack and was committed to making it work. She had been drawn to him for the very reasons they now suffered. Theirs had been a rocky relationship that followed in the same pattern as everything else in her life: no middle ground. The good times were incredible and the bad times, devastating. They struggled to learn where the middle ground was, but neither knew how to find it.

Kylie suddenly felt like holding him, just taking him into her arms and keeping him there; instead, she merely took his hand. He was unusually quiet watching the attorneys party instead of joining in. She

knew by his pursed lips and stunned gaze that he was afraid, but was lost as to how to comfort him.

She lay her head back onto the seat and looked out at the billowing clouds looming ahead. They created a surrealistic wall that seemed impenetrable. She looked out at the wing of the plane as it glided through the turbulence. She had often wondered how the appendages could withstand the constant pressure, the rivets holding all of the many pieces together. The bright light danced on the silvery surface as the arm quivered. She looked down at the mountains below, their uneven edges appearing so distant. Just looking at the vast frozen area made her shiver. She took Jack's hand and nestled into the seat, her gaze falling once again to the wing of the plane. The roar of the engines had replaced the voices around her. She lay back and let the steady blare lull her into a drowsy calm, when she saw something out of the corner of her eye move onto the wing. Her stomach dropped as she turned. It was a bird—a large black raven facing sideways, and it seemed to be staring in at her.

"Jack, look!" she exclaimed, clutching her husband's arm, but when they turned back to the window the bird was gone.

"What?" Jack asked with alarm.

"I just saw a bird. It landed on the wing and—"

"Jesus Kylie, you scared the hell out of me," he groaned, wiping his brow. "How could a bird land on the wing? We must be going two hundred miles an hour," he argued.

"It did," she said defensively. "It was just standing there."

"There's no way."

"It was," she grumbled, but when she turned back to the window, to the smooth surface of the wing, her conviction waned. She had been drowsing, so it was possible that her eyes had deceived her. "Maybe it just lit there for a second," she said quietly, but Jack was already onto his own thoughts. His quick dismissal of the subject left her feeling saddened and chilled. She sighed heavily and closed her eyes, but the image of the bird refused to leave her. It stood solidly on the wing, its tiny eyes peering into her soul. The wind rushed past but it was unmoved. She abruptly became aware of the speed of the plane, herself trapped in the belly of the roaring beast. With a start, she quickly opened her eyes. She was prone to claustrophobia and recognized the beginnings of an attack. To her dismay, she found herself in the worst

seat imaginable. Not only were they in the back of the plane, but luggage—strapped by a cargo net—formed a wall behind them. Sitting in anything other than an aisle seat was always a mistake, but she had relinquished it to Jack so that he would feel more comfortable. She looked over at her husband who sat twisting a napkin in his hands. She shook her head and smiled to herself. “What a pair . . . the brave Irish O’Rourkes,” she said softly. The comment drew a smile from Jack. Kylie’s heart warmed, for he was simply beautiful when he smiled. As she looked into the childlike eyes, a shadow passed over the cabin. Both O’Rourkes turned to the window. They had finally reached the wall of clouds, the billowing thunder heads rising around them like skyscrapers, the plane carefully making its way through a valley between them.

“God, I’ve never seen anything like this,” murmured Kylie, Jack silent beside her.

As the plane penetrated one of the storm cells, the cabin was swallowed by the darkness.

Two

JACY GREERS SAT AT THE RADAR SCOPE INSIDE THE AIR ROUTE TRAFFIC Control Center with headsets on and a space heater at her feet. She had a twin-engine requesting assistance through an impossible storm over the White Mountains—a range notorious for bad weather. The pilot was foolishly attempting to penetrate a solid line of thunderstorms and needed guidance through. She had been handling the flight for the past twenty miles and had been anticipating the call with mounting anxiety.

“Irresponsible dumb-ass,” she grumbled as she scanned the monitor for a hole in the hazardous line of weather. If the macho-types would just stay out of the skies on days like this, it would make her job a lot easier. She shook her head and just as she was about to depress the push-to-talk-switch an impatient voice came back through the radio. It was the voice of Bud Graves.

“Center, Merlin Niner-Six Alpha. I’m getting knocked all over the

place up here. I need to stay out of these cells. Every time I go in, I pick up more ice.”

“No shit,” she grumbled to herself. She herself had warned the pilot of the storm as soon as he had come onto her frequency, but it had not deterred him. Now he wanted options and she had none to give. She knew from the Center Weather Advisory that the storm cells were towering to 45,000 feet. The Merlin IV was incapable of climbing over the storm and if the pilot tried to get under it, he would run the risk of boxing the plane inside a canyon without power enough to clear the mountaintops.

Before she could respond, Bud Graves came back over the airwave. “Center, Merlin Niner-Six Alpha, I’m getting severe icing here at seven-thousand feet. I need to get lower now,” he said emphatically.

“Negative, Merlin Niner-Six Alpha,” she responded. “Minimum Vectoring Altitude in your area is 6500 feet. I can’t take you any lower.”

“Center, Merlin Niner-Six Alpha. Cancel my IFR flight plan.”

Jacy shook her head. The pilot was cutting his cord to Air Traffic Control so that he could engage in scud running—a term given to the dangerous endeavor of an aircraft picking its way through unfamiliar terrain beneath low-lying clouds. But there was nothing she could do to stop him. Now that he was dumping his flight plan, he could go wherever he wanted as long as he stayed out of the IFR governed clouds.

“IFR cancellation received,” she reluctantly responded. “Remain on that squawk code for flight following.”

With shoulders tensed, she watched the plane’s descent until it sank below her radar coverage. “Merlin Niner-Six Alpha, I’ve lost radar contact,” she said.

“Roger.”

“You’re on your own,” she said softly as she stared at the place on the scope where the signal had vanished.

“WHO NEEDS you anyway?” Graves muttered, the sour taste of indigestion rising into his mouth. He stared nervously through his ice-covered windshield at the canyon before him. After changing his

heading, he found the skies beneath the heavy clouds more suitable, but he was concerned about the new, unfamiliar course. He had flown in and out of the Dixville Notch area several times before and had always been able to follow the same flight path. Since he had deviated from that plan, he was forced to take the terrain as it came at him, but at the moment his reflexes were slower than he would have liked and his head felt like someone had rammed a poker into his skull. For the first time in his life, he was regretting those last few Scotch and sodas.

THEIR NEW altitude seemed dangerously low to Kylie. She stared intently out the window watching the sides of the mountains pass so closely it felt as though they were going to scrape one of them. The cabin of the aircraft was completely quiet, the party had stopped and no one seemed to be laughing anymore. It was clear when they had abruptly dropped into a ravine that Bud Graves was not exactly in control of the situation. The misty clouds were squeezing down on them, while the dark wooded terrain seemed to be closing in from both sides.

The sliding door to the cockpit was suddenly yanked open. Graves looked back into the cabin, his face taut. "Murphy, get up here and help me with the charts," he directed at what appeared to be the drunkest of the attorneys.

Jack straightened in his seat. "You've got to be kidding. That guy's going to help him?"

"That's right buddy," Graves said, overhearing the comment. "Unless you happen to be a pilot."

"He's been knocking back booze the whole flight," Jack retorted.

"Don't worry about it," chirped Murphy pivoting back to him. "I'm not going to fly the plane—I'm just going to check the charts for him. Isn't that right, Bud?"

"Just get your butt up here," said Graves.

Murphy obediently made his way to the co-pilot's seat where he began rummaging through a flight bag on the floor. "Jesus Bud, you've got the whole country in here. Which chart is it?"

"The Montreal Sectional."

The passengers watched in silence, their confidence in the situation waning as the attorney fumbled to unfold the awkward paper. When

he finally wrestled it open, the stiff chart nearly filled the cockpit. Graves had to bat it aside to see through his windshield.

“We’re about twenty miles southwest of Berlin,” Graves said. “What’s the highest altitude in our area?”

“Let me see,” muttered Murphy. “6288.”

“Check it again,” Graves said under his breath.

“6288 feet,” Murphy repeated.

Graves looked at the chart himself and was clearly disturbed by what he saw. He abruptly reached back and yanked the cockpit door shut closing the passengers off from further view.

THE MERLIN IV advanced up the rising canyon at 170 knots with maximum power. The nose of the plane pointed upward as the small aircraft struggled to out-climb the steep grade. The passengers inside were thrust back in their seats, the severity of the situation apparent to all, everyone aware of the straining engines.

Kylie looked out the window but the steep angle of the plane made her instantly nauseated. Never before had she experienced such a sheer climb. She could see the precipitous wall of rock moving beneath them but the top of the mountain was nowhere in sight.

A man in the rear of the cabin began praying softly, “Hail Mary, full of grace . . .”

“Oh Jack, I’m sorry,” Kylie whispered, looking into his frightened face. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, there’s nothing to be sorry about,” he said with feigned good spirits.

As the plane struggled higher and higher, Kylie felt as though a huge rock was bearing down on her chest. The ceiling of the plane seemed suddenly lower than before, and the seat ahead of her appeared to be pressing toward her legs. It felt as if the oxygen had been sucked from the cabin, leaving behind a stale void. She began to hyper-ventilate. The luggage behind her moaned as the curve of the wall threatened to crush her if she didn’t get out of its way. She tried to lift her head from the seat but the force of the climb pushed it down. She gripped the arm rest to pull herself up but there was nowhere to go. She could see Amelia peering back at her through the crack in the seats, her friend’s worried face fueling her panic even more.

"I can't breathe," she whispered.

Jack grabbed her hand with a firm grip, "It's okay," he said.

The prayer in front of them continued in the ritualistic drone. "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb—"

"We'll be alright," Jack said, but she could tell he was not convinced. She squeezed his hand tighter and began to weep.

"I can't believe this," she said. She felt foolish for panicking, even though she was still in the midst of the terror. She smiled a genuine smile, the tears streaming down her face. "You're the one who's afraid to fly, remember?"

The man continued to pray, his voice becoming louder and louder. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death—"

"—Amen! Now shut the hell up!" an anonymous voice yelled.

Suddenly, the plane leveled and they could see the jagged top of the mountain. Sunlight burst through the clouds and the ground was falling away.

"We're going to make it!" an attorney announced.

Just as the passengers cheered with relief, there was a massive jolt. Clipping a dead tree, the plane swung violently to the side. The passengers were yanked sideways as the plane lurched and then thrust into weightlessness as it knife-edged downward, the nose angling toward the floor of the valley. Within a second they were in a full nosedive, the passengers' torsos held tight by their seat belts, their arms and legs dangling like rag dolls. Objects hurtled through the air, pummeling against the suspended bodies.

Jack's hoarse scream seemed an illusion that danced around Kylie's head. She felt her body going limp as her jumbled vision began to fade.

Out of the chaos, the plane rolled back upright and they were once again flying level. Like a hideous ride at an amusement park, the insanity had ended as abruptly as it had started. On the brink of hysteria, the passengers were lulled back into a hesitant ease.

The cabin was eerily quiet as the moans began. Kylie and Jack were still in their seats, Kylie's sweater spattered with blood.

"Where are you hurt?" Jack asked as he inspected her for the source of the crimson stains.

"I'm fine," Kylie replied, as they both realized that the blood had

come from an attorney at their feet. He was lying face up, his broken nose bleeding profusely. His eyes were dazed as he lifted himself from the floor and silently stumbled to a seat at the front of the plane.

Jack kissed Kylie's cheeks and her lips then pulled her into his embrace. She quickly undid her seat buckle and stood to look over the seats at Amelia and Dix. They were both shaking and pale.

"Quite a spin, huh?" said Dix, the smile on his lips betraying the terror in his eyes. He had a cut on his ear that was dripping blood onto his black leather jacket.

"You're bleeding," Kylie said softly.

"We're alright," said Amelia, her arm securely around Dix. "You'd better sit back down."

"Buckle back in, Kylie," Jack said, pulling her into the seat. She looked out the window and saw that they were once again over a valley. She let Jack strap her in, then rested her head against his thumping chest and began to cry. He held her tight, his strong lean arms wrapped about her, as he whispered soothingly into her ear. Suddenly, his body went rigid and he was instantly silent. Kylie pulled back and saw the horror in his eyes: he was looking out the window. She followed his line of sight but at first didn't see anything. The wing was vibrating just as before, the air was clear and the storm seemed to be behind them. Then, her eyes were caught by the moving wing. Something was different. It jumped out at her like a grotesque amputation of a man's hand, only there was no blood or hanging arteries, only hanging wires. There was a void where the tip of the wing had been severed.

IT WAS ONLY a matter of minutes before the plane would reach the next ridge. It had already started the precipitous climb, but the damaged wing was creating additional drag and vibration. With the sounding alarms, the incessant praying had begun again, accompanied by panic-stricken outbursts.

In the midst of the chaos, Kylie and Jack hovered together; both were silent.

The cockpit door slid open, Murphy struggling from the co-pilot's seat covered in vomit.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday," came the desperate voice of Graves.

“Merlin Niner-Six Alpha. I’ve got damage to my flight controls. I need a heading to the nearest airport.”

A female voice came back over the radio. “Merlin Niner-Six Alpha. You’re not in radar contact. State your position.”

“Somewhere around . . . I don’t know,” said Graves, panic overtaking him. “I . . . don’t . . .”

“Merlin Niner-Six Alpha, say fuel on board . . . souls on board,” came the female voice.

Graves turned back to the passengers, his eyes red and terror-stricken. “I uh . . . eleven souls on board and my fuel is about . . . eight-hundred pounds,” he stammered as he looked back to his gauges.

The praying grew frenzied, as the noise and vibrations intensified. Kylie and Jack clutched tighter together, both starting to weep. They looked into each other’s eyes, each with a gentleness; never before had the bond been so strong. Ten years of pain and regret passed through them, all the missed moments when they should have said they were sorry. It had been a long road but they had made it through. Kylie brushed her cheek against her husband’s, then tenderly kissed him on the lips.

The shudder of the plane grew frenzied as Graves struggled for control of the crippled aircraft.

“Oh Jesus God!” came the scream from an attorney.

It tore at Kylie’s heart to hear Amelia crying in the row ahead of her. “It’s okay Melia,” she said, but her voice faltered. She knew that it was a lie; they were going to crash. She looked out at the mountain which moved toward them like a vast dream. Shards of sunlight broke from the clouds reflecting off the brilliant snow-covered surface, stabbing into the black woods.

“Put your head down,” Jack said, but Kylie couldn’t move, couldn’t release her gaze from the window. With her surging adrenaline, her focus felt sharper, the deep colors intensifying. The dark trees rustled softly, the shadows playing between them. As the screams around her faded, drowned by her own heightened pulse, she felt something beneath the twisting shades . . . an unseen force that seemed to be drawing them inward. At first it looked like branches casting shapes over the ivory mountain, but as the plane drew nearer, the dark streaks

looked almost human, a grouping of shadows that spread distinctly over the white sheet of snow. She could see the trace of clothing, the posturing of unseen heads, and eyes as gray as night peering upward. It looked as if someone or something waited beneath. At once, the cold terror filled her, and her mouth opened in a silent, agonized scream. The plane hurtled downward, yet she couldn't take her eyes off the shrouded presence beneath. "God help us," her mind whispered, as the darkness swallowed her.